

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

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BYRNING IT UP

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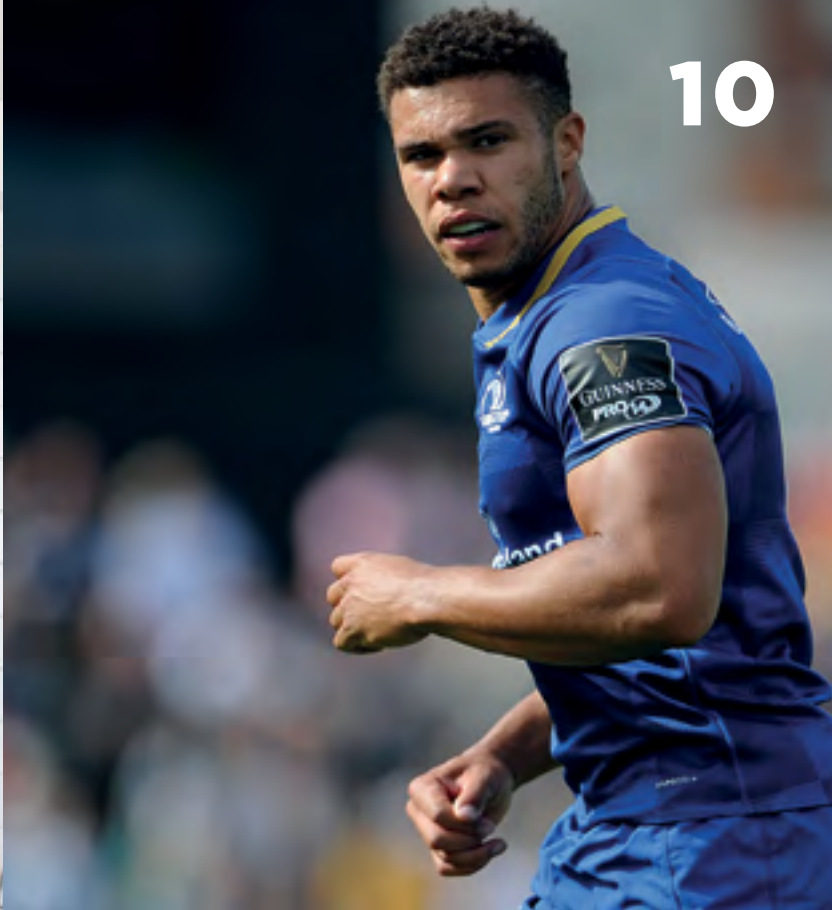
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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH

Over the past month, we saw some big insights into the future of our game in Ireland. This November was disappointing and encouraging in equal measures. The heartbreak of losing out on the opportunity to host a World Cup was tempered by the performances on the field. The national team, with a number of new faces on board, managed to comfortably beat a previous World Cup winner, put on an entertaining display on against an extremely dangerous Pacific Island team and conquer the side that has knocked us out of the World Cup on two previous occasions.

In November, all in Irish Rugby were looking to the future

in some capacity most looked to 2023 but others had a shorter focus. In rugby and in life we set visions or goals for the future, some long term but others more immediate. There is no denying the huge disappointment that was felt when World Rugby Chairman, Bill Beaumont revealed that France were to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023. We know that whatever was recommended in the World Rugby assessment or voted upon by member Unions, Ireland would have hosted a unique and special tournament. This long-term objective for Irish Rugby to host a major world tournament has been put on hold at least for the moment. We hope that the opportunity arises again and we are provided the chance to show all our country has to offer.

It was particularly telling that a number of new and fresh



faces appeared in the matchday squad for all three series games. Based on selection, it was observed by many that the vision for national team management was less to 2023 and more towards Japan in 2019. Whilst it is always encouraging to see new players coming through the provinces into the national team, it is even more reassuring when those players play a pivotal role in the victories.

The players had a different and more narrowed focus not looking beyond the next game, excuse the cliché. Whilst both South Africa and Ireland battled off the field to host a World Cup, the real fight for the players was on the field. The key for rugby players is to look at the next game in isolation as even a suggestive glance beyond that can have a negative impact in the psyche leading into the match. Whilst this works in the game of rugby it doesn't necessary work for life, we all need to plan for the future to ensure we are prepared as best as we can for any speed bumps on the horizon. That in itself is a challenge for Rugby Players Ireland, we are trying to balance the understandable match to match view required of rugby player with the longer-term vision required in life. Unfortunately, the career of a rugby player is finite and requires some careful planning to prepare for the day when the boots are finally hung up. The Player Development Programme (PDP) run by Rugby Players Ireland in partnership the IRFU aims to do exactly this, by broadening the vision of its members beyond the game the aspiration is that the transition from professional rugby into

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the “real world” will be somewhat softened. We are continuing to develop the PDP to provide a wider network of corporate and academic partnerships to provide greater opportunities for our members.

Similarly, Rugby Players Ireland are looking beyond the here and now to help shape a sustainable elite game in the county. With the allure of lucrative contracts, the financial might of the English and French clubs has never been so evident. The lure for our members will always be there however, the players in Ireland can be sure that the player welfare they receive and supports in place in this country are unparalleled elsewhere. We continue to work toward the vision of the association which is “to make Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby” by trying to put all supports off the field to provide an environment that others cannot compete with. We believe in the philosophy that better people make better players and by providing every opportunity for our members to grow themselves of the field there will be a positive impact on the field.

We all love sport because the highs we feel are made all the more joyous by the lows we have felt in the past, November was no exception. We lost to France for 2023 but our players brought us the real thrill with their on-field performances. In a rugby sense we are in a good place as we continue to climb the World Rugby rankings and build toward 2019, we hope we can match this success with a positive long-term vision for our players and the game in Ireland.

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



NOVEMBER INTERNATIONALS



Following a clean-sweep of victories in the November series, Ireland enter 2018 as the third ranked side in the world behind England and frontrunners New Zealand. A comprehensive showing against South Africa, in addition to hard fought victories against Fiji and Argentina ensured that Ireland leapfrogged Australia who endured a difficult month.

IRELAND 38-3 SOUTH AFRICA

On the eve of the 2023 Rugby World Cup bid announcement, Joe Schmidt challenged his Irish side to lay down a marker. It turned out to be a significant one, albeit against a disappointing South African side. A record win over the Springboks was secured on a grey November afternoon, doubling the differential between the sides from the previous best of 32-15 in 2006. That day, Andrew Trimble was the tormentor in chief against a side replete with individual talent in the form of Bryan Habana, Jean de Villiers and Pierre Spies. 11 years later, it was another Ulster winger who lit up the Test arena. In what was only his third cap for his country, Jacob Stockdale's name was on everyone's lips following a ruthless display in defence and attack.

IRELAND 23-20 FIJI

An experimental Irish side edged out their Pacific counterparts in Dublin having squandered a 17-3 lead. With only Andrew Conway and Devin Toner returning from the dismantling of South Africa the previous week, it was inevitable that there would be some nervous moments en route to the finish. However, the resurgent Fijians were good value for money, thrilling the Irish crowd with a typically a flamboyant and inventive performance, compounded with more traditional structures. Job done, with plenty of lessons learned.

IRELAND 28-19 ARGENTINA

Eight of those who featured in the fateful World Cup quarter-final of 2015, returned to the matchday squad to acquaint themselves with Los Pumas. However, despite being backboned by substantial experience, it was the likes of Stockdale and Chris Farrell who proved to be the difference, making their presence felt with some telling contributions. Although the result was never in doubt, Argentina deserve immense credit for their fight to the finish. Nevertheless, the real success of the November series had already been secured such was the seamless introduction of Stockdale, Farrell, Andrew Porter, Darren Sweetnam, Stuart McCloskey, Kieran Treadwell, Adam Byrne, Bundee Aki and James Ryan to the frenetic nature of a home Test. Joe Schmidt's squad are in a good place as the Six Nations looms large on the horizon.



RUGBY WORLD CUP 2023

Following an assessment of respective bids for the hosting of the Rugby World Cup in 2023, on November 15th the World Rugby Council announced that France has won the bid to host the tournament for the second time.

Despite strong support for Ireland's bid which has been led by former Ireland captain Brian O'Driscoll, Dick Spring and Philip Browne, a technical evaluation report recommended South Africa as the host nation. However, following a vote by secret ballot, the World Rugby Council arrived at their decision at Kensington's Royal Garden Hotel in London.

Reacting to the news, Leinster and Ireland centre Garry Ringrose, who will be 28 at the time of the 2023 tournament, commented:

"I'm obviously hugely disappointed that we were unsuccessful in our bid to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023, but I'd like to wish France all the very best in their preparations for the tournament. To have come this far in the bidding process is a huge achievement for a country of our size. Our bid team must take immense credit for all their hard work throughout the process."

"It would have been a huge honour and privilege for the people of Ireland to host the world for a few special weeks and for us to represent them. Hopefully we might get that opportunity again sometime in the future. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that I'll be lacing up my boots when that time comes but I'll look forward to playing my part from the stands alongside the world's greatest supporters."

Former Ulster and Ireland flanker Stephen Ferris also said:

"Having played in New Zealand in 2011, I've seen at first-hand how special an experience a World Cup can be. Despite playing in places like Auckland and Dunedin, it felt as though we were the home team as all of the Irish in that part of the world seemed to come out and support us."

"I believe that a tournament in Ireland would have been like no other. I was hugely excited by the prospect and at the thought of all of those Irish people throughout the world coming home. Sadly, it was not to be but I'm confident that we will take learnings from this bid and propose an even better event sometime into the future."

Also commenting on the news was Rugby Players Ireland CEO, Simon Keogh:

"There is no doubt that the success of Rugby Players Ireland's members on the field has had a significant part to play in Ireland's ability to compete in this bid process. While the players and their coaching teams continue to break new ground competitively, Rugby Players Ireland also strives to realise its vision that says: 'Ireland is the best place in the world to play rugby.' We are disappointed with the news, but we will continue in our efforts to provide for our players and ensure that Ireland remains at the forefront of the game."

DRUIDS GLEN GOLF CLINIC

The former American professional golfer Gardner Dickinson once said: "They say golf is like life. Don't believe them. It is much more complicated than that." Some members of the women's programme recently found that to their peril at a recent golf clinic hosted by Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort in partnership with the Confederation of Golf in Ireland (CGI) and the Irish Ladies Golf Union (ILGU).

"We are always trying to do something new and different," Nancy Chillingworth says. "Throughout my work I have found that having the ability to play golf, however good or bad, is a very useful skill to have in the back pocket. In just about any industry where interpersonal relationships matter, golf can be an extremely effective networking tool. It is a great place to get to know someone. You don't have to be a good golfer to make a good impression."





NOVEMBER CLUBHOUSE

Prior to the opening November Test against South Africa, the latest Heineken Clubhouse event was held at the Sandymount Hotel. Providing some insights on the afternoon were former Ireland internationals Gordon D'Arcy, Kevin McLaughlin and Shane Jennings.

As we seek to grow our past player network, various Clubhouse events have taken place throughout the country. In reconnecting with old teammates and supporting the current players, these occasions have been enjoyable trips down memory lane. Strong attendances were recorded at all four provinces: Leinster v Munster (October 7th), Munster v Racing 92 (October 21st), Ulster v Harlequins (December 15th) and Connacht v Brive (December 16th).

ANNUAL RUGBY CLASSIC

Long regarded as one of the best sporting and social events in the international rugby calendar, the 30th Annual World Rugby Classic took place in Bermuda November. Showcasing many of the best rugby stars who have recently embraced retirement as well as some of the world's leading businesses, the Bermuda Classic has grown from an Easter retreat for retired players in the 1970s into an international tournament of some repute.

Togging out in some distinctive Classic Lions garb in 2017 were David Corkery, Tomás O'Leary, Marcus Horan, Mike Ross and AIL stalwart David Moore. All were to the fore as the Classic Lions overcame the Classic Springboks in the Plate Final. In the main event however, the Classic Pumas won the title for the first time since 2011 when they saw off a Classic All Blacks side.

RADAR NI



As Northern Ireland's first and only, life sized, interactive safety and life skills education centre, RADAR (Risk Avoidance and Danger Awareness Resource) brings safety and life skills education crashing into the 21st century! Located in Sydenham Harbour Estate in Belfast, their unique premises contains a full sized street scene, with a house, bus, train, court room, prison cell, shop, police station, boat and much more.

Members of the Ulster Academy are amongst one of the many groups who have visited the centre in recent months. With bespoke programmes tailored to the age category of visitors, the players took plenty of learnings from several risk-factor modules associated with young men including driving, mental health and substance abuse.



BOARDMATCH

Established in 2005 to address the skills needs of the governing bodies in the Not-For-Profit sector, Boardmatch Ireland is a leading governance charity. Through its support in the development of the community and voluntary sector, Boardmatch strengthens boards and management committees by matching candidates, enhancing leadership skills and fostering links between public, private and not-for-profit sectors to the benefit of all.



By linking with Rugby Players Ireland, Boardmatch Ireland believes that a significant impact can be made upon this sector, while our members stand to benefit from a positive public image and exposure to a strong culture of corporate social responsibility. For more information, please contact your PDM or Christina: christina@rugbyplayersireland.ie.

IRPA CONFERENCE

In November, all of the rugby player associations throughout the world were invited to our offices to partake in the IRPA conference. Over 40 representatives were in attendance for the duration of the meeting in Dublin. Two items were predominant on the agenda. Firstly, the Executive Board of IRPA officially signed the agreement recently secured with World Rugby (see page 38 for more details). The other important aspect was in linking the various Player Development Programmes together. This proved to be an ideal forum to share and learn how the respective associations support both their current and former players in areas of mental wellbeing and education, while insights were provided as to the management of databases and how players are tracked once they move abroad.



WORLD RUGBY REFEREE OF THE YEAR

Our congratulations go to Joy Neville who was named as World Rugby's Referee of the Year at their gala event in Monte Carlo.

Neville, who spent ten year representing Ireland before calling time on her playing career after the 2013 Grand Slam, officiated at the Women's Rugby World Cup final, refereed a senior men's international game and became the first women to officiate in a Champions Cup game.

Unfortunately, Sean O'Brien failed to take home the coveted IRPA Try of the Year title. O'Brien set pulses racing in Auckland this summer during the Lions' 30-15 defeat to the All Blacks when Liam Williams travelled with the ball from well inside his own 22 before O'Brien crashed over the whitewash to score one of the greatest tries for the tourists. However, the public vote deemed that Joaquin Tuculet's scintillating effort against the England was the worthy winner.



MENTAL AND WELLBEING SUMMIT



Earlier this year, the second Mental Health and Wellbeing Summit took place at the Aviva Stadium. The event had clear objectives: to make information and education accessible to people across all sectors of the community, to create an overall awareness of how we are all affected by mental health issues and ultimately, how we can create prevention in addition to cure.

In attendance were organisations such as the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána, the HSE, the Department of Justice, Sport Ireland and Rugby Players Ireland. Together with members

of the public, working professionals and students from a range of colleges nationwide, all those present learned about and discussed the management of mental health both at work and in the homeplace.

As the campaign manager for Tackle Your Feelings, Créde Sheehy-Kelly was invited to speak at the summit alongside Clinical Psychologist Dr. Eddie Murphy, who also as an advisor to the campaign. As a Sport and Performance Psychologist, Créde has extensive experience working with professional and elite athletes to enhance their performance and support their welfare. Her workshop at the event sought to use the lens of professional sport to explain how we can inspire more people to become proactive in looking after their wellbeing. Créde also demonstrated some sports psychology strategies that can be applied practically to develop resilience and optimise mental wellbeing in our everyday lives.

RUGBY ATHLETES' COMMISSION

There was a strong Irish representation the Rugby Athletes' Commission meeting which was held in Monaco at the end of November. Irish captain Rory Best was accompanied by Jamie Heaslip, Sene Naoupu, Isaac Boss and Dr. Ella McCabe as player welfare issues, laws and emerging game trends were discussed at length. Other attendees included Conrad Smith, Dylan Hartley, Conrad Smith



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BYRNING IT UP

The powerful Leinster winger on a new milestone in a career not without its challenges.

A freezing Saturday evening in January is never really something to write home about once the frostbite abates. But for one man it marked a significant milestone in a fledgling career. Starting on the Leinster wing opposite Nemani Nadolo, Adam Byrne tormented Montpellier in the Champions Cup at the RDS last season. As a key protagonist in the 57-3 demolition job, Byrne finally announced himself on the European stage over four years after his Leinster bow.

Sitting in the Angelsea Stand beside some club members from Naas RFC, a cackle of laughter greeted another retelling of how a 15-year-old Byrne would swot several would-be tacklers aside as he made for yet another try. It may have only been juvenile rugby, but the signs were clear. As we joined them in waxing lyrical over another searing break in adult form, the only thing that surprised them was that it was only now that the rest of us were seeing it.

As an 18-year old debutant in December 2012, we all assumed that Byrne had potential. We just didn't see him very much thereafter.

"Everything happened so quickly," Byrne remembers of his first appearance for the province. "I was training with the sub-academy but the IRFU's Player Management programme and a few injuries meant I was called in for a few Leinster A games and senior training sessions. It was all a bit surreal - from walking out to training with Brian O'Driscoll to getting a call from Joe [Schmidt] during my Christmas exams to say I was in the squad to face Ulster that weekend. I just thought 'wow!' Unfortunately, a couple of weeks later I broke my leg."

Byrne failed to feature again for the senior side for three years. To compound his misfortune, the likes of Garry Ringrose and Rory O'Loughlin had emerged on the scene, adding to an already extensive array of backline talent. No doubt injuries played their part, but questions were also posed of certain aspects of the Kildare man's game. Inevitably, with little outlet to prove his detractors wrong, the winger began to doubt his own physical and technical abilities.

"I wish I had more self-belief as a young lad," he says. "While I always had the drive and desire to become a professional rugby player, I never truly believed that it would happen. Some people have an innate confidence and a mental toughness, they can delete and move on from mistakes in the moment. But a lot of people, including myself, don't think the same way."

Despite several prominent showings once again this season, some media outlets continued to suggest that Byrne fine tune his game away from the senior side. Having been knocking on Joe Schmidt's door the previous season to no avail, it

ADAM BYRNE FACTFILE

DOB
10 April 1994 - Kill,
Co. Kildare

Height
6ft 4'

Weight
101kg

Position
Winger

Club Career
Naas RFC;
UCD RFC

Leinster Debut
29 December 2012

**International
Career (apps)**
Ireland U20 (6)
Ireland (1)



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The whole experience from the moment I was called into the squad was great opportunity to learn as much as possible

seemed as though another international campaign was set to pass the youngster by.

"For years, if I made a mistake on the training pitch or during a game it would play on my mind. I'd retreat to the wing and worry about making a mistake the next time I got the ball. But through working with some great coaches, I have learned that the toughness that so many of my teammates had was a skill - a skill that can be trained and improved upon just as I would go out and practice my tackling. I began to use physical triggers and started to write down my worries no matter how silly they might have seemed before tearing them up as if to symbolise that they're gone from my mind."

On his international debut against Argentina in November it certainly seemed that Byrne was free of any shackles. A trademark meandering run, followed by a shuddering hit on Ramiro Moyano helped him to settle into the Test environment. Then, when Chris Farrell was forced to take his leave, it was to Byrne whom Joe Schmidt turned to fill the void in the midfield.

"Joe has always trusted in me and my abilities. He gave me my first taste of professional rugby with Leinster and the first real belief that I could make it at this level. I'll always be grateful to him for that. Nevertheless, I thought I had missed my chance when the Fiji match came and went so



it was incredible to get the nod for the Argentina game. I was just trying to make sure I knew my detail as much as possible for the wing and was probably a little bit naive not looking at 13 as much. But that's the thing with the team, Joe felt I could do the job and everyone rallied behind me. The whole experience from the moment I was called into the squad was great opportunity to learn as much as possible in a new environment with a great coaching staff and the best players in Ireland. I tried to take as much as I could on board."

As he pursues a Masters in Biomedical Engineering at UCD, Byrne is well accustomed to processing new information. With words of warning from his grandmother ringing in his ear ("sport, school and socialising – you'll only be able to manage two, so choose wisely!"), Byrne's sporting aspirations have always been balanced by the books. Despite harbouring ambitions of becoming professional sportsman (incidentally, his brother Sam is on the books at Everton FC), Byrne was intent on becoming a physio and travelling the world with a sports team. However, exposure to the reality quickly made

him realise that it might not be for him.

"I think it's extremely hard to know what you want to do for your life when you're so young. A lot of jobs and courses aren't what you imagine them to be. My mother was great for getting me to experience as much as I could. I was never academically gifted, I just worked hard and tried to get as many points as possible in the Leaving Cert. I suppose it fed into my competitive mindset and ultimately led me to UCD.

"Personally, balancing my college work and rugby has been great. I feel the two compliment each other in certain ways. That doesn't mean to say it's easy – it's quite the opposite, especially now in my first real year of consistent action with Leinster. It's easy to get bogged down in the sport so helps to have another focus to occupy my mind and a different group of friends. Both can be particularly helpful when I'm injured or not getting a look in with the first team.

"With so much going on, I have to be efficient in all that I do. I often cycle into training so that I can catch the last 20 minutes of a lecture in UCD – it might save me two hours trying to learn it myself. If I find an hour at Leinster, I'll do some extra passing or video work. I do my best to train hard, I work hard in college but make no mistake, I enjoy my time off when I can get it!"

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CARING FOR THEIR COMMUNITY

Past and present Connacht players have been helping to raise spirits at local hospice

It had been a routine day at Galway Hospice until Joanne Tierney received a call from reception as she was preparing to leave for the evening. Not expecting any visitors, she made her way to reception, slightly bemused as to who it might be.

As she approached reception, she was greeted by two young gentlemen. "We pass this building often and thought we'd call in for a look around," Joanne, of the charity's fundraising department, was told. "We'd like to know a little more about what you guys do here."

"They were extraordinarily open," Joanne tells us as she recalls Saba Meunargia and Jamie Dever's first visit to Galway Hospice in March 2016. Joanne says, "Oftentimes and understandably so, first-time visitors to the hospice are a little apprehensive, but Saba and Jamie were simply curious. Following an introduction to the history of and services provided by Galway Hospice, I showed them the building, shared with them some inspiring stories and explained to

them, that while there is an association with dying and death, the focus at Galway Hospice is on living well and making every moment matter for our patients and their families."

Soon thereafter, Meunargia and Dever became frequent visitors at Galway Hospice, taking time out from their busy schedules to visit those on the hospice's Inpatient Unit and in the Day Care Centre. Sharing their experiences with teammates, others began to accompany them, in particular, James Connolly and Ultan Dillane. Indeed, now that Meunargia and Dever ply their trade outside of Ireland, Connolly and Dillane continue what their friends began early last year, and maintain the relationship with Galway Hospice.

"Before we linked in with the hospice, I didn't really know what it would be like," admits Connolly. "Thankfully I'd had no reason to go to one before, so I was a little apprehensive, but my perspective changed very quickly. A lot of people, including myself, had often thought of a hospice as being quite a sad

place. In actual fact, it is probably one of the most positive places I have been to."

While not all of the patients would call themselves rugby fans, a visit from the players has, nevertheless, become a highly anticipated event at the hospice. Indeed, given the success of Connacht Rugby in recent years, many proudly display their latest photograph with James and Ultan, which often thrills their visiting relatives.

"When I tell everyone that James and Ultan are coming to visit, you can see the excitement on their faces – patients, their families, staff and volunteers," Joanne describes. "They have and continue to help create some very special memories. You see, their visits can make a huge difference to a patient's day and how they're feeling on that particular day."

Throughout their time visiting the hospice, Connolly and Dillane have made many friends. They give of their time and spend hours chatting to patients. However, one patient stands out, as Connolly explains. "We were in the cafeteria one day and we noticed a young guy sitting down by himself. Ultan went over to him and discovered that his first language was French. Obviously Ultan speaks French too so they had an immediate connection and struck up a conversation. We got his number and we kept in touch, visiting him when we could. But perhaps Ultan and I were a little naïve in not really understanding how ill he was. It crept up very quickly and he deteriorated over the space of a few weeks. Sadly, he passed away a few months ago and that took a toll on us."

Caring for patients who have life limiting illnesses, the traditional remit of a hospice has vastly expanded. While the majority of patients are cancer patients (70%), Galway Hospice also cares for people with MS and Motor Neuron disease, for example. The range of services provided is extensive and include, Inpatient Care, Home Care, as well as Day Care and Bereavement Support. All of the services are provided free-of-charge, for as long as they are needed. However, every year Joanne and her four colleagues must raise €1.8m to ensure the delivery of these services.

"While people do pass away under the care of Galway Hospice, the focus here is on ensuring quality patient-centred care and quality of life for those whom we have the privilege of caring for," Joanne says. "However, some of our patients are well enough to live their lives outside the hospice. Every Tuesday and Wednesday, our Day Care patients are collected from their homes throughout Galway city and county by our wonderful volunteers, who take them to the hospice Day Care Centre to get their hair and nails done, to avail of aromatherapy and physiotherapy treatments; to receive medical

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While there is an obvious association with dying and death, a hospice is really about living well and making every moment matter

assessments, or to simply enjoy a game of bingo or some flower arranging. During this time, their carers receive a break, which is also very important."

"Some of our Day Care patients would live alone, so when the lads come to visit and bring such positive energy, it gives them a great boost. The support of Saba, Jamie, James and Ultan, and now more of their teammates, has been and continues to be greatly appreciated by everyone at Galway Hospice. It's lovely to witness the level of care and compassion they have for our patients," Joanne tells us. "They don't realise the positive impact their visits have on our patients - many recount their visits for days afterwards. But that's what is so refreshing, whenever the lads come in, they come in as they are, as our friends, and that's how we see them. A couple of years ago, you couldn't write a story like this, but now you can. On behalf of Galway Hospice, thank you to Saba, Jamie, James and Ultan for their incredible support," concluded Joanne.

If you would like to support Galway Hospice, please telephone the fundraising department on 091 770868 or email fundraising@galwayhospice.ie.



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS *UPDATE*



Earlier this year, Andrew Trimble, Craig Gilroy, Darren Cave and Stuart McCloskey were the focus of the latest Tackle Your Feelings ambassador video.

The mental wellbeing campaign, which is delivered in partnership with Zurich, has already seen Jack McGrath, Cathal Sheridan, Hannah Tyrrell, Shane Jennings and former Connacht coach Pat Lam provide rare insights into the life of professional sportspeople, including the challenges that they face away from the game and the strategies that they use to overcome them.

"As professional rugby players we know that we are in a very privileged position," said Trimble. "However, people often forget that behind the jerseys and the cameras we are just regular guys who wake up in the morning with the same headaches and worries.

"Yet, we also recognise the impact that our profile can have on our communities. I am delighted to be part of the Tackle Your Feelings campaign and help to enact some positive change in the behaviours of my peers, rugby supporters and the wider community."

Through the latest Tackle Your Feelings video, the players highlight one of the key messages of the campaign which is the importance of developing self-awareness. The players discuss how having a better understanding of yourself enables you to thrive under pressure and to get the most enjoyment from life on a daily basis.

The campaign, which was launched across Ireland in March 2016, aims to break down stigma around emotional vulnerability and to inspire people to become more proactive in looking after their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Créde Sheehy-Kelly, Campaign Manager for Tackle Your Feelings at Rugby Players Ireland, added, "We were delighted when the Ulster players indicated that they wanted to get involved in the Tackle Your Feelings campaign.

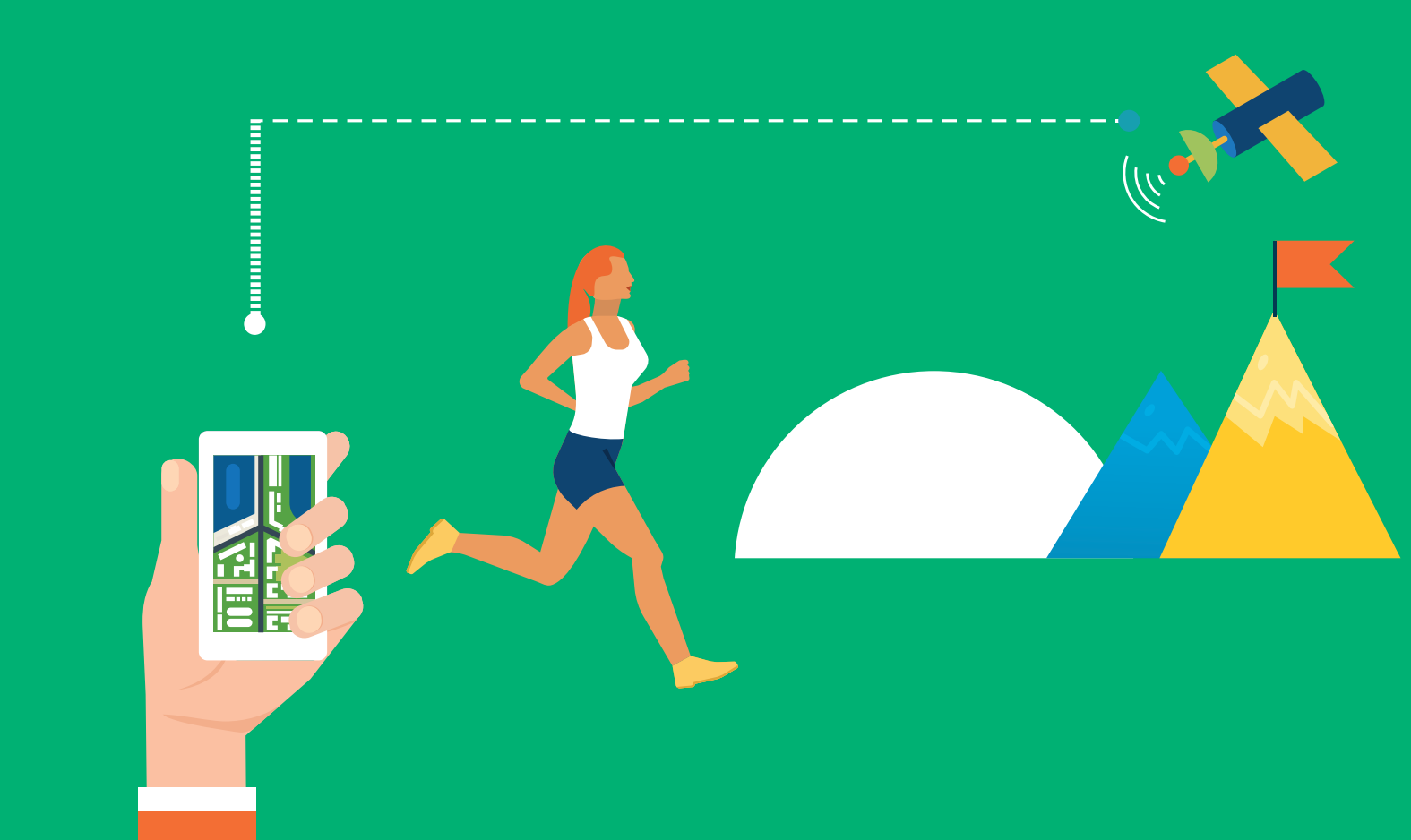
"Every player that puts their weight behind this campaign helps us to further spread the message that you don't need to wait until you are feeling under pressure to tackle your mental wellbeing. It is something that we also place a lot of emphasis on at Rugby Players Ireland in terms of providing support services to our members. The leadership shown by those players who have embraced the campaign has had a noticeable impact on breaking down stigma both within the player group and beyond."

Elaine Hayes, Corporate Responsibility spokesperson at Zurich, also added: "At Zurich we have always prided ourselves on our commitment to making a difference in our local communities. By partnering with Rugby Players Ireland on the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, we are pleased to play our part in helping to inspire people to take charge of their own mental wellbeing and to equip them with strategies to do so.

"Through such an effective campaign we hope to help embed wellbeing into everyone's DNA and help them to be at their best."

TAKE POSSESSION





UP TO DATA

It's quite amazing to think that there is very little that is unknown about a professional rugby player. From motion trackers to equipment, apparel to sleep monitors, players are surrounded by tables, charts and graphs as soon as they walk into their training base in the morning.

"I remember when Michael Cheika was at Leinster and he wanted me to get to 104kg," former Leinster captain Kevin McLaughlin recalls while speaking at One Zero in Croke Park. "We were all working hard in the gym but he wouldn't let me in unless I was at least 100kg! I think that was the start of it all [sports science] in Leinster but it has pushed on considerably since."

Data and statistics have become part of the everyday language of sport. On a daily basis, statisticians crunch massive amounts of numbers and information to help teams gain a competitive edge. Everything from a player's weight, mood and diet to their heartrate, top speed and amount of times they stop to tie a shoe lace becomes part of that player's profile, unveiling trends that can help to predict future behaviours.

Yet while it may seem burdensome, the use of

player data has its obvious benefits. Firstly, it can be hugely influential in the management of a player's welfare. With the help of advancing technology, it is easier to determine the best training methods for individual players from an injury prevention perspective, a space within which McLaughlin's Kitman Labs is currently thriving. Available technology can also break down a player's on-field performance to the most minute detail and therefore help a coach to analyse with every aspect as he sits down to pick a side that is most likely to succeed in the next fixture. Furthermore, there is commercial potential in the issuing of such data to the public.

Information is power and we have more data now at our fingertips than we can possibly consume within our lifetimes. Not all data is created equal, or more aptly, distributed equally. As we strive to find winning percentages we have accumulated masses of data on athletes, instances and general statistics of sports.

This then begs the question: who owns it? Who has the rights to it? Who should be allowed to gain from it?

As data in sport is so multi-faceted, it has been

“Everything from a player's weight, mood and diet to their heartrate, top speed and amount of times they stop to tie a shoe lace becomes part of that player's profile, unveiling trends that can help to predict future behaviours.”

too broad to define any specific ownership. The inevitable argument will be that any information that is collated by the team with the intention of developing new systems or understanding performance is derived data and therefore their intellectual property (IP). Yet a player's contract is now becoming an integral tool in the determination with many such agreements now beginning to set out the parameters between the player and his organisation, especially where a commercial interest potentially ensues.

While the NBA have included clauses in their recent collective bargaining agreement that precludes the use of data in contract negotiations, the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) have also announced a partnership with a Boston-based company, WHOOP, to use an officially-licensed piece of wearable technology. By providing its members with the WHOOP Strap 2.0, players now have 'easy access to, ownership of, and the option to commercialise their health data. The partnership is aiming to allow players to "become both healthier and wealthier by collecting, controlling, and ultimately having the ability to sell their own health and performance data."

"From a rugby perspective, we're still relatively new in this space," Simon Keogh points out. "GPS systems were first introduced in 2009 and since then we have seen so much development in the area. The Americans lead the way, but the Australians aren't far behind and we have exchanged information with them on how they manage it. They've started to commercialise it in the AFL, but this is an area that we have to be extremely careful of, especially with our representative hat on. Once any information is out there, the fear is that it could enter into negotiations regarding a player's work rate or his ability to do things. Within their collective agreement they have had to include some very restrictive clauses.

"I was speaking recently with Rob Nichol, the CEO of the New Zealand Rugby Players Association (NZRPA) and even though they are the most developed of all the rugby representative bodies, they still don't have anything in place. If we want to be the best in the world in what we do and this is the direction that we are all going, we need to get ourselves into position."

The introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018 will also revolutionise the practices and procedures being used by many sporting

“Information is power and we have more data now at our fingertips than we can possibly consume within our lifetimes.”



organisations and bodies. The GDPR emphasises transparency, security and accountability by data controllers and processors, while at the same time standardising and strengthening the right of European citizens to data privacy. Therefore, the risk of data falling into the wrong hands or the exploitation of an individual's detail without his/her consent will be significantly reduced. Sporting bodies will be regulated in the way that they undertake their monitoring activities and process the resulting data. Non-compliance by an organisation could result in a €20 million fine or 4% of their annual global turnover – a marked change from the disproportionately low fines that are currently in place.

In order for sports clubs to lawfully process a player's data, they will need to identify a legal basis for doing so. Where consent is absent, a club may rely on their legitimate interest for the performance of a contract. However, even where consent is present, is it freely offered where there is the risk of termination or discriminatory treatment if they choose not to?

"If there is a collective issue, it is easier for us to stand in. Ultimately, we want to protect the player but it can be difficult." Keogh suggests, before Leo Moore of William Fry interjects: "I think we're going to see a move away from consent under the GDPR. As an employer, information can be processed in the absence of consent in order to determine the fitness or working capacity of the employee for instance. It may become part of the contract that you have to wear a device but it is the management of that data in the background; proportionality, justifications and other legal basings that will have to be worked through. It's not necessarily about the individual anymore, it's about identifying the best team. I think we will start to see some big changes over the next 12 months."

Yet Leinster and Harlequins player Keogh urges caution.

"You can go through all the legal issues surrounding player data, the transferability of stats and so on, but quite often in rugby you can have the lowest body fat, you might be the quickest, the strongest... yet that doesn't necessarily make you the best rugby player. I was fortunate enough to have played with a guy called Will Greenwood. I think he was at the bottom of every chart going. He was the slowest and had terrible body composition – he looked like such an awkward guy; but he was brilliant. He had the ability to always make the right call at the right time.

"Statistics are great from an injury perspective and they are helpful when measuring performance, but we have to be careful that we don't become over reliant on them. They can never be the be-all and end-all."

LUTTON LOAD

Former Ulster player hoping to continue in the game, but other careers coming into view

Ricky Lutton



As Stephen Ferris lifted Will Genia and ran with him during the Eden Park showdown against the Wallabies in 2011, Ricky Lutton was looking on from New Zealand's South Island. Playing a bit of club rugby whilst he worked in the construction industry seemed to suit the 25-year-old but his time in that hemisphere was coming to an end. Yet, as Ferris helped Ireland to a famous victory, little did he think that in a few short months he would be doing his own lifting of the Ulster flanker.

“I knew it was the last chance saloon for me in terms of professional rugby

Thus far, Lutton can reflect on an enjoyable and unorthodox career in the game that has come full circle in just over then busy years. Heavily involved in the Ballyclare rugby community, Lutton remains on the lookout for opportunities in the game. “I’m back at Ballyclare High School as coach and enjoying my time as player/coach with Ballyclare RFC” Lutton informs us. “I’m not retired, I’m still young and I feel as good as I ever have, but while I’d love to continue in the professional game, I have to be realistic and take into account that having missed out on an entire season, that ship has probably sailed. I have to press on with my new career, but if a chance arose to play at the top level again I’d find it very hard to say no.”

Starting out at Loughborough University where he studied Sport and Exercise Science, the Belfast-born prop continued his studies at Oxford University having been lured to the famous institution by his England Students coach Steve Hill. Then, upon completion of a Masters in Science and Medicine of Athletic Performance, Lutton packed his bags and headed further afield.

“I was out of the Irish system for a good while” Lutton says. “To be honest, I had totally given up on a career in rugby when I went out to Australia and New Zealand. I just wanted to see the world, have some fun, play rugby for the craic and do some work to cover the bills. But when I landed into Christchurch and began to play a bit, I found that it was very competitive. A lot of the All Blacks in the area would come back and play for their club on a week off! Looking back now it was a great testing ground. Plenty of lads who I played against have since pushed on in their careers – lads like Joe Moody, Codie Taylor and Nepo Laulala are All Blacks now!”

Lutton enjoyed all aspects of his time in the on the other side of the world. Being so content in himself saw him reap rewards on the field and he was reminded why he loved the game so much. A series of impressive performances soon brought him to the attention of a Canterbury side who were preparing for the ITM up. His outlook was beginning to change.

“I was never going to stay in New Zealand for the long haul, so when I was called into the squad, Scott Robertson (the current Crusaders coach) took me aside one day and said: ‘listen, you should really give this a go when you get home.’ He provided a few references and gave me the push I needed at that stage. The experience

RICKY LUTTON FACTFILE

DOB
25 April 1986
– Hawera, New Zealand

Height
6ft

Weight
113kg

Position
Prop

Club Career

Canterbury RFC
(New Zealand)
Belfast Harlequins
Ulster Rugby

of playing there certainly made me a much more rounded and mature player. I reckon that if I had gone into the [Irish] system without what I had learned there, I probably would have failed."

Returning to Belfast at the end of the domestic season in New Zealand, Lutton turned out for Belfast Harlequins and hoped that he might finally get the opportunity to carve out a career in the game. His upward curve continued and he did his chances no harm when he was named the Club Player of the Year at the Ulster Rugby Awards in 2012. Yet, with the security of several qualifications in his back pocket, Lutton did not face the same pressures as other aspiring professionals.

"I knew it was the last chance saloon for me in terms of professional rugby, but I can't say it was something that I pushed for. The situation developed of its own accord, and things came to a head when I was offered a contract with Esher in the English Championship. I wanted to stay in Belfast so I asked Harlequins to see what they could do and they managed to get me a few games with the Ravens. That resulted in a trial with Ulster for the remainder of the season. I guess I took my chance."

And so, Lutton began a five-year stint with his home province. A first start away against Cian Healy and Leinster was a baptism of fire but in helping Ulster to come away with a rare victory at the RDS, Lutton was further convinced that he could cut it at the top level. Continuing his steadfast progression, Lutton became a firmly established member of the Ulster squad and earned call-ups to the Emerging Ireland tours of 2013 and 2014. By then, Joe Schmidt had been in contact and Lutton was aware that he was on the cusp of his plans before injury began to wreak havoc with his development.

"I'd had a couple of niggles, but I was back playing in January of this year. I was fit, raring to go and playing well again. Yet I was getting a few mixed messages from the Ulster coaching staff and eventually in March I was told that there was nothing for me anymore beyond the 2016/17 season. At 31, I didn't want to move for the sake of playing rugby for another couple of years, it had to be a good challenge and financially viable for me and my family, and by March it was a bit late to get anything decent elsewhere. There were some options but nothing that convinced me it was worthwhile to up sticks again. It was time to look at my future career rather than grind out a few more years playing lower level rugby."

As his career began to wind down, Lutton approached Pamela Gilpin for some help. Having expressed an interest in the law, he was put in contact with some of the foremost practitioners in

Northern Ireland. Once convinced of his path way, Pamela assisted him with his application to DeMontfort University in Leicester. He is currently studying for his Sports Law LLM.

"A number of things came into it. Obviously, I have a huge interest in sport as evidenced by my qualifications. But breaking into sports science can be extremely difficult so it got me thinking. I felt that Sports Law is an emerging force and it all seemed to make sense for me. Rugby is stronger than most, but I do believe that the voice of sportsmen is under represented in general, especially when it comes to athlete welfare. There is an opportunity for me there, but I needed to give my own voice an authority."

While the programme is based on distance learning, Lutton has been proactive in making his presence felt on the Sports Law scene. He has attended several conferences in recent months including the LawinSport Conference in London and the Northern Ireland Sports Law Conference at which he was able to discern the high-priority issues for the region. However, while Lutton is enjoying a new chapter, challenges have manifested themselves in different ways.

"I've struggled a little bit with managing my time more than I'd like to admit. As a player, every day was mapped out, whereas now it's all down to me. I like to get to the gym in the morning to get myself up and at it, then I coach at Ballyclare High School and with the local rugby club. I try to fit my study around it but when I'm not faced with imminent deadlines, college work can sometimes go on the long finger and I get roped into different things. It's something I need to improve."

But despite the time on his hands, Lutton is yet to make it back to the Kingspan for a match. "Even though I still have plenty of mates in there, I have preferred to watch from afar. It has probably been the most difficult adjustment, looking in from the outside and knowing how hard it can be to please people. It's tricky to watch and hear criticism of the players, I know that the lads are in there working their asses off and sometimes things just don't go to plan. You can't fault the effort. I hope to go along for the Munster game on New Years' Day, and a few months back Tommy Bowe invited Gary Longwell, Matt McCullough, Scott Young and I in to meet some of the new players and watch training – a cultural thing. I enjoyed that but otherwise I've pretty much cut all ties. My focus lies elsewhere."



I felt that sports law is an emerging force and it all seemed to make sense for me.



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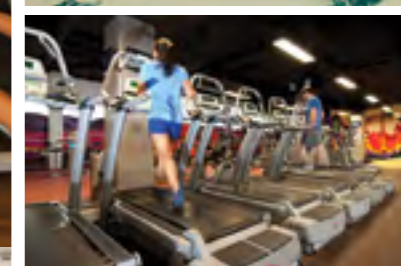
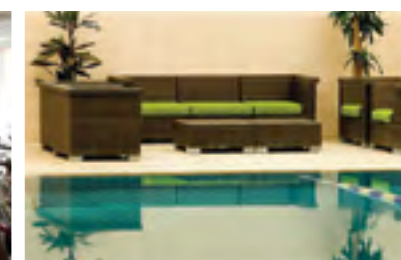
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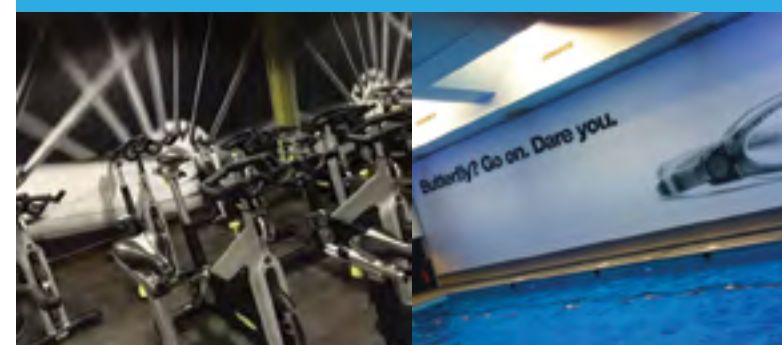
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CASH for KIDS

It is a veritable nightmare for any parent to wake up on Christmas morning and be greeted by tears. Unfortunately, this is an all too common occurrence in Northern Ireland with over 100,000 children living below the poverty line. The Cash for Kids Mission Christmas appeal seeks to ensure that every child wakes up to a visit from Santa.

Responding to the needs of children in communities across the UK, Cash for Kids are a network of charities owned and run by Bauer Media. For nine months of the year, each of the charities raise money in their respective areas to help support children who are disabled, disadvantaged or suffering from abuse or neglect so that they can live life to the full and realise their individual potential.

"Disadvantaged is our activation word" says Darren Fowler who is the charity's regional manager in Northern Ireland. "In reality, we support those who may be struggling socially, educationally, physically or financially. We have supported big projects such as helping charities to build a premises to deliver their vital services right down to an individual who might be struggling with traditional education and lacking focus so that they might learn to thrive in a social or alternative educational setting. Once

we know how we can help, we try to eradicate disadvantages, whatever they might be."

For many families, Christmas is a luxury that they simply cannot afford. In the modern context, disadvantages are never so evident than at this time of year. The commercial nature of Christmas can put families under immense financial and social pressure. Many parents are therefore faced with a decision - in order to provide something for their children on Christmas morning, something has to give. Some choose to leave the heating off, others decide to cut back on food, many incur debt. For many more, Christmas simply doesn't enter the equation.

"Of course, a toy is a nice thing to receive on Christmas morning," Fowler says, "but more importantly for the family unit, the day is celebrated in the same way as everybody else in society seems to. It can be hugely damaging for a child to go out into the street and have to make up stories as to why they are wearing the same clothes they have worn throughout the year. It becomes a routine day. This is where we come in - there is a great deal of goodwill in Northern Ireland. People are happy to give and support. We are the conduit through which all of that good flows."

“

For many families, Christmas is a luxury that they simply cannot afford. In the modern context, disadvantages are never so evident than at this time of year.



With just two full-time staff members to deal with over 13,000 applicants in 2016, the charity relies on the help of the Northern Irish community to meet with the demand. This year, thanks to an established relationship between Business in the Community Northern Ireland and Rugby Players Ireland, members of the Ulster Rugby Squad got the chance to play their part.

"Having a child of my own, as well as nieces and nephews, I know how special Christmas morning can be," the 19-times capped Australian Christian Lealiifano tells us. "I am very fortunate that my career has given me the chance to provide them with many of the things they might ever need or want. Sadly, some parents struggle to put food on the table at Christmas, not to mention a gift under the tree. I don't want any child to be left behind, especially at this time of year. It was great to help

“

The difference that the lads have made in the few hours that they have been here with us is vast. It would take our team an entire day

such a great initiative and see how much the public actually care. There are so many kids out there in need of a gift this Christmas and this was my small way of doing something about it."

"What we do is not possible without volunteers," Fowler asserts. "The difference that the lads have made in the few hours that they have been here with us is vast. It would take our team an entire day to get so much done. They also find it to be a bit of a humbling experience. For each child we try to arrange bundles into £45 worth of gifts. Very few of these guys will have any gift sitting on their couch worth less than £45. But it can make a massive difference to one of our families. The parents or guardians can sit down and enjoy Christmas morning, while their children feel the warmth and love that every child should feel on that special day."





GOING THE EXTRA MIELE

Small kids and even big kids look on the life of a professional sportsman as a kind of ideal existence. Adoring crowds, neat fitting jerseys and all the trappings of life in the game present a picture of the Promised Land.

But before they step out before the bright lights and flashing cameras, they have to invest years of toil, sacrifice and determination into a career that is always vulnerable to the perils of their professional environment. While many will reflect upon satisfying careers, others find that the gods have a wry sense of humour and tend to exact a price for their seeming gifts.

"The importance of encouraging young players to engage in study programmes cannot be overstated," says Roger Downer. "Professional rugby is a precarious career with many talented young athletes failing to secure



or renew contracts. Their career is relatively short and there is always the threat of career-ending injuries."

Downer was speaking on behalf of the newly launched Miele/Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary which rewards young rugby players who wish to undertake higher education programmes of study while pursuing their ambitions in the game. With almost 70 applications, Downer, a former President of the University of Limerick, was joined throughout a lengthy selection process by Maeve McCarey (Miele), Dr. Deirdre Lyons and Isaac Boss (both Rugby Players Ireland).

"My experience on the committee served to demonstrate the considerable difficulties that young men and women have to make in order to follow their dreams," Downer explains. "Indeed, as a panel we regretted that only five scholarships were available to satisfy the needs of many worthy applicants."

Having spent most of his professional career in education in Canada as the Head of Biology and Vice-President at the University of Waterloo, Belfast-born Downer moved to Thailand to preside over the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand before returning to Ireland in 1998. In his role as President of UL, Downer oversaw a marked increase in student numbers and research productivity, whilst he also commenced the substantial expansion of the University.

Few better qualified then to undertake the task then!

"Student athletes face several challenges," Downer continues. "They have to manage rigorous, prescribed, energy-sapping training sessions, weekly matches and associated travel with scheduled lectures and study periods. There is also the financial burden – they need to maintain an expensive high-calorie diet and stay in accommodation close to the training ground. Young players also face the same everyday costs incurred by college life, but because of their unfailing commitment to their sport, they are unable to take on part-time work to offset those costs like many of their fellow students."

"Some of our applicants live hours away from their training base, spend most of the day getting to and from training and then set off home to do their coursework before bed, only to get up at 5am the next morning to go again. That's hardship. But these players do it because they have a dream. They believe that they have what it takes to be a professional rugby player and are willing to make the sacrifices to make it happen. But there is no guarantee. There might be a perception that the sport of rugby doesn't need this kind of assistance, but in fact, the case is very strong."

Heavily steeped in the game since he first toggled out with Collegians (now Belfast Harlequins) as a youngster, Downer is acutely aware of the difficulties faced by players at both ends of the scale. Therefore, he is keen to ensure that the appropriate structures are in place for all whether they are setting out in the sport, or finding a new path.

"I believe that we should define a vision for where we would like to see rugby. A strategic plan perhaps – although I don't like them. I like dreams. Martin Luther King did not stand on the steps of the Washington Monument and say: 'I have a strategic plan!' He said: 'I have a dream!' Like our young players, I too have



“The importance of encouraging young players to engage in study programmes cannot be overstated

a dream. I'd like our sport to be seen as an outstanding entertainment product, competitive throughout the world, populated by fine young men and women who contribute to their communities and avail of the wonderful opportunities to develop good habits and good discipline... all of those things."

Despite possessing many qualities that are extremely attractive to potential employers, young players need to be harnessed through their education. While some crucial supports are in place, not least through their Player Development Managers, the flexibility of their respective institutions are vital. Lecture schedules can play havoc with aspiring sportspeople who are often compelled to train for several hours each day. Downer though, believes that this has to become something of the past.

"Continuing education is the new opportunity. Knowledge is changing so rapidly that everyone must upskill regularly. Even the way those teachings are delivered will have to change. The professor should guide the student in the process of discovery rather than teaching facts. I have a phone here that has every fact that I'll need for the rest of my life. It should be about discovering new things and applying those learnings rather than trying to cling to every word of a pontificating lecturer."

"With everyone now trying to keep up, soon universities won't be able to offer lectures at 10am and expect people in the workforce to attend. Some of the major institutions in the world, places like Princeton and Harvard, have already made their courses available online across the globe. From time to time we have a bit of a problem getting students into the courses that they want. The universities will have to become more flexible if they are to survive."

Survival is of course the aim of the game, both on and off the field.

"I was coaching the University team in Canada one day when I thought there was an eclipse of the sun. Instead, this enormous man was standing over me. He introduced himself in a strange accent, told me he was a student and said that as he'd played a bit of rugby he would be happy to help if I needed it. It was none other than John Williams, a former captain of the Springboks. During his career in South Africa this man could not walk along the street or into a restaurant without people wanting to stop him. Suddenly he was anonymous and he had difficulty with that."

"I want to avoid a situation whereby a player loses their identity. Even if their rugby fails to take off, they have a career to fall back on."

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BOND GIRL

Stacey Flood

Few parts of the world have been so favoured by nature as Australia's Gold Coast. Should an alien life-form ever pitch up down there, it is unlikely that it will ask to be taken to our leader – it will merely beg that he be allowed stay in that paradise.

Given her own experiences of the region, it might have been easy for Stacey Flood to do likewise. Luckily for Ireland though, the Women's Sevens scrum-half has her sights firmly set on glory in green.

"Once we had secured qualification for the World Cup, I began to think about getting away for a while," the 21-year-old Technology Management student tells us. "Most people my age were heading on J1s to America, interrailing, Thailand, all the usual backpacker spots, but I wanted to go away to play rugby somewhere too and develop my game. Thankfully Anthony Eddy was more than happy for us to go and he helped to set up the placement in Australia."

Linking up with Bond University in Queensland over the summer alongside Claire Boles and Katie Heffernan, Flood played a starring role in the inaugural Aon Uni 7s series, a new high-performance competition for Australian universities in the international off-season. Under Ben Gollings, an iconic figure on the Sevens World Series circuit, the trio also had the opportunity to learn from some of the best the game has had to offer during their time in the southern hemisphere.

"The girls were a great addition to our squad," Gollings says. "They brought with them a different training intensity due to coming from a national programme. This helped to lift our girls and create more competition. Stacey obviously brought her World Series experience, Claire was very consistent and offered us a very stable platform upfront, while Katie thrived on the field. None of them ever stopped running. But not only did they add a great deal on the pitch, they bonded extremely well with our girls off the field."

As captain, the Flood further enhanced her growing reputation on the rugby scene with some virtuoso displays courtesy of her 'x-factor' according to Gollings. Growing into her role, Flood became hugely supportive of her new teammates, encouraging them at all times, yet prepared to step up to the plate when needed.

"I was a bit surprised," Flood admits. "We were training for over a month down there before the competition actually started. I suppose that gave the three of us plenty of time to bed in and learn from someone like Ben who is the record points scorer in the World Series and someone everyone on the circuit would look up to. I was in good form and playing well, but I was still taken aback when he asked me to captain the side. A few of the girls were relatively new to the sport and I suppose Ben felt it was important that someone with experience led the team. It was a great honour."

Hailing from a sporting household, Stacey followed her sister and best-friend Kim into the rugby world at the Railway Union club in Sandymount. Albeit, with some convincing.

"I stumbled into it a bit. I was playing a lot of football with Clanna Gael Fontenoy GAA Club and with Dublin's underage sides, while I also was playing soccer with Cambridge Girls when I wasn't chasing All-Ireland's. Rugby just didn't come into it. I didn't think it was for me. But then Railway Union came into our school to do a few sessions before they held a local tournament which I played in. That's when I realised that I could use a lot of the skills I already had, and I began to take to it.

"My folks were a bit concerned about the tackling element at first," Flood admits. "They were happier watching all four Flood sisters winning Dublin championships with Clanna Gael together. But once we got through a few games, it became a real matter



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Most people my age were heading on J1s to America, interrailing, Thailand, all the usual backpacker sports, but I wanted to go away to play rugby somewhere too and develop my game.

of pride for them and they could see the opportunities that rugby could give us. My dad is a big rugby man now, he can't get enough of it! As for my tackling? Well it was an adjustment, but I was always getting sinbinned in the GAA anyways, so it was grand!"

As a contracted player since she was 18-years-old, Flood has seen more of the world than most because of rugby. However, despite tournaments being held in some prime locations across the globe, Flood's stint in Australia was the first time that she spent a considerable amount of time away from Ireland.

"I did miss home quite a bit, especially coming from such a big and close family. I Facetimed them all when I could, but I also recognised that I was in a very fortunate situation. I couldn't complain about being on the Gold Coast, doing a bit of training and gym-work before hitting the beach for the afternoon. I've had quite a unique experience for someone my age, playing in places like Dubai, Vancouver, Las Vegas. I have seen so many cool places and made so many friends across the world, so having to fend for myself over there was a small price to pay... I could have done with a few of Nancy [Chillingworth]'s cooking workshops before I left though!"

Despite their questionable culinary skills, it seems that Flood, Boles and Heffernan made quite an impression during their short stint down under. Such was their impact that Gollings hopes to see more Irish players take their lead.

"While many of our players are quite new to the game, there is a strong level of competition and standard here. From an Irish perspective, I think the placement can be of great benefit as it gives players game time in addition to a different perspective on the game.

"Stacey, Claire and Kate added a lot when they were here and I believe they learned a great deal too, as well as being able to enjoy a different country and its culture. I would like to see more players utilising this opportunity – it's a great one!"



IRISH WOMEN'S RUGBY UPDATE

A strategic review process into the women's game in Ireland is currently being finalised. As part of that process a focused steering group has been created and will be co-chaired by Mary Quinn (IRFU Committee) and Su Carty. The committee's remit is to review the current strategy for the women's game and to make recommendations about the direction of future strategies for the development and growth of the game in Ireland from the ground up.

The work carried out by the steering group, allied with the review of the 2017 Rugby World Cup, will contribute to building a framework for a long term strategic plan on the future of the women's game in Ireland delivering into the next Rugby World Cup cycle and beyond.

As key stakeholders, the views of the players are being incorporated into this report and shall be communicated to the steering group once the review has concluded. This aspect is being led by Rugby Players Ireland and we will continue to be involved throughout the process.



DUBAI

The Ireland Women's Sevens side won the Dubai 7s Challenge Trophy for the second year in succession when they overcame South Africa 24-7 in the final. Despite a win against Fiji in their opening game of the tournament, losses to Canada and Spain precluded the Irish from any further involvement in the tournament proper. Such are the standards now set by the Irish side, it was no surprise that they powered to a dominating 38-5 victory over the Japanese on the second day of the Dubai extravaganza. The result put Ireland back on track from a

performance perspective, setting up a finish against the South Africans at the Sevens Stadium. A positive ending should have Ireland enter the Sydney stage of the series in good confidence.

Meanwhile, a youthful development squad secured two late wins against Russia Development and the South African Tuks to qualify for the Dubai 7s International Invitational tournament final. However, despite being able to call upon the World Series experience of Kim Flood, Niamh Byrne and Anny McGann, Randwick Magic proved too strong in the decider.



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A WINDOW INTO WHAT

SHAKES
VARLEYFormer Munster and
Ireland hooker Damien
Varley says it as it is.

It seems as though you are never far from rugby when you are in Munster. Whether you are down in Ahakista or across in Dungarvan, the Thomond roar will wake you up in the morning and form the soundtrack for your day.

But while Damien Varley now spends much of his time less than a mile away, the famous stadium might well be a hundred.

When the likes of O'Gara, Wallace, Hayes and Flannery began to take their leave of the red army, it was to Varley whom many at the province turned as they sought to fill the void. And justifiably so. A strong and influential character, Varley commanded the respect of the dressing room and possessed all of the attributes that many felt would lead Munster back to the pinnacle of the European game.

At just 33, Varley might still be thriving in that role but for a foot injury that robbed him of his career.

"I still break down," Varley admits. "Running for about 200 metres is fine but I'd struggle to run 2km. No doubt the lads would say that I'd have struggled with that anyway..."

Despite carrying the problem into the 2013/2014 season, Varley enjoyed one of his best campaigns for Munster and regularly captained the side in the absence of Paul O'Connell. Of course, as a proud Limerick man there was little chance of the hooker heeding medical advice and standing down to sort out the issue.

But, soon he had no option.

"We were playing against Leinster in October of 2014. I felt in great shape but I'd had a bit of a setback on the hard ground away with Ireland in Argentina that summer. At one stage during the game in Dublin I put my foot back in a scrum and it just completely went. We won the game but I remember very little of it. I was panicking. There was pure elation all around me after the match because Leinster had been the form team for a few years and it had been a while since we had beaten them. But I was in the toilet, crying."

For once, this was a challenge that Varley would fail to overcome.

Having been overlooked by Munster in 2006, the hooker was forced to look elsewhere for a professional contract in the game. For months, his efforts to find a club proved fruitless before an introduction brought him to the attention of Ian McGeechan and Shaun Edwards at Wasps. Despite an array of hookers in line before him, Varley took whatever chance came his way. Indeed, just one day after signing for the club it was his try that secured victory over Leicester Tigers.

"It was a strange year," Varley recalls. "McGeechan was due to take the Lions to South Africa so he was very distracted. The following season it showed I think because they went to shit. But I had a great time when I was there. Early enough into it, myself, Redser (Eoin Reddan), Jeremy Staunton and Mossie Lawlor all knew that we would be leaving so it was like a six-month stag! It was incredible!"

While Varley enjoyed the bright lights of London, his playing time there also restored belief in his abilities before he secured a swift return to Munster. Suffering from a crisis of confidence when initially faced by an array of "monsters and men" that included Raphael Ibanez, Phil Vickery and Simon Shaw, Varley held his own on the training field despite shipping a few hard knocks. It proved to be the greatest learning curve of his career.

"I sometimes think that it's almost too easy for players these days. They expect to have their arse wiped at times. The game misses the hardened edge that you used to get when Shannon or Young Munsters played Garryowen and you really had to grind it out. All the top players came through the AIL – they were playing rugby, week-in, week-out. Those guys had an unbelievable work attitude. Don't get me wrong, I'd love to be out there today but there is more of a celebrity type culture attached to it at times and there's so much to contend with. It can be dangerous territory. Managing social media is a job in itself! But, if you've the right attitude, you should be able to handle it all properly.

"Some of the lads in the game, through no fault of their own, are a bit like children never experiencing the outside world struggling to either get a contract or even just chasing work. You get paid to do what you love, you go home, put the feet up, watch Game of Thrones and eat your dinner. You're well looked after. It's such a bubble that you only see when you're out of it. We are a selfish people and will do the best thing for our game, but players also need to be smart and broaden their horizons, see the bigger picture which is often hard depending on what's happening in camp. Instead of asking 'what can you do for me' they need to look at themselves. You have to be able to contribute something outside of the game. None of us really know what we want to do in the long run..."

Varley met with some criticism when he first took over The White House Bar on O'Connell Street in 2016. Petitioned to resist transforming a pub that was known for its artistic and cultural heritage, Varley had made up his mind and overhauled the property, much to the annoyance of the local poets and songwriters.

"I carried out a year's due diligence on the place. While I was watching it, it just seemed to be quite

disjointed. I made a few changes. There was some rubbish in the media but I never got drawn into it. We wanted to try new things, jazz nights, nice glasses – that was a big learning curve! We wanted to be different, give the customer a drink in a nice glass but people were sticking them into their handbags and walking out! We were robbed blind! I've experienced a lot of new things since I left the game, but I never thought I'd be dealing with something like that!

"Of all those experiences, I think that one of the biggest things I've had to remember is that I have come from a very blunt environment where you're called everything under the sun for honesty and accountability, but you'd meet afterwards and you chat about whatever was going on. That doesn't happen in the real world which can be hard for me. Things have always been very black and white with me, but not for others, people don't like that abruptness and so potentially finding a balance or surrounding yourself with people who understand goal oriented people's attitude can be challenging. That has probably been my biggest learning since I hung up my boots."



Life as a learning student wasn't always to Varley's taste. Growing up with aspirations of being an actor or musician, Varley's creativity instead lent itself to the rugby pitch (and the after-match festivities). Although he studied engineering at the University of Limerick, he admits that he cared little for academic work. Now though, as he seeks to make the most of his opportunities, Varley is too busy to rely on luck. Alongside The White House Bar and various other business interests, Varley has recently graduated from his MBA from Edinburgh University and he has just returned to UL to do a Diploma in Aviation Leasing and Finance.

"Going back to college a few years ago opened my eyes a little bit. Now, whenever I meet the lads I tell them about how important it is to have something in the background. The profile that rugby can give you opens so many doors. Some of the best businessmen in the world will give you their time, but it's up to you after that. There is a world of opportunity but you have to be a little patient. There is nothing better than getting into something and experiencing it for yourself, whether that's training as a plumber or shadowing someone in business. In any event, jobs for life don't exist anymore so it's best to try as many things as you can.

"From chatting to Marcus [Horan] and seeing what is going on, I think Rugby Players Ireland are beginning to really drive on now. Workshops and meetings were just another chore in the schedule of players and they were passengers of the association rather than being an integral part. We're tough people to deal with but we're also a nice little family... and everyone in the family wants to help. That's where I see Rugby Players Ireland playing an integral role."

Damien Varley

FEED OUR HOMELESS

All we can do is try to remember that summer in Dublin. The young people walking on Grafton Street and everyone looking so well - It's a lovely image as Bagatelle remind us. But as the longer nights creep in and the rain begins to come down in torments, many of us hide away behind our curtains, warming our cockles by the fire. A far remove from the streets of Dublin's inner city.

Yet, that is where you will find Natasha Morgan and her partner Tony Walsh on most evenings. With the number of people sleeping rough on the city's streets up by more than 50% in the past year, the duo felt compelled to act. Starting with a soup run last year, Feed Our Homeless Inner City Dublin now operates on four nights of the week and has become a literal godsend for the homeless contingent in the capital.

"On any given night we serve about 300 people," Natasha tells us. "They range from rough sleepers, families who have no access to cooking facilities, old-age pensioners who struggle when it comes to food and even people who are in full-time work but sleep on the streets because they can't afford the rent. You wouldn't believe what we have seen."

Having experienced the scale of the problem on the capital's main thoroughfares, the couple quickly realised that their service provision required a significant expansion. While Tony heads up the operation on a full-time basis, Natasha has returned to college to ensure that she has all the necessary skills to meet the demands of their growing organisation. "There's a lot of work that goes on in the background. You're linking in with solicitors, accountants, trying to find premises, linking in with shops, trying to get donations, doing paperwork, managing the volunteers - it's all go."

Of course, at the root of all their work remains providing for those in need, many of whom wait for them to set up their stall to get some food or to avail of the company. "You do become attached, especially when some are so vulnerable. We had an elderly man who would always drop by to share a laugh and a joke, if he didn't appear you began to worry. But you can't dwell on who isn't there. Many may have moved on or availed of an opportunity. For instance, one of the lads who I would see on a regular basis in the same spot went missing for a while. Eventually I got word that he had a place. Next thing, I was sitting in my college course and there he was!"

Despite their expansive plans, Natasha acknowledges that they would not survive but for the team of volunteers on the front-line. Yet while they regularly boast sufficient numbers, they were no doubt boosted by the presence of several members of the Leinster Rugby squad recently. Having helped out a number of weeks back of his own accord, Peadar Timmins subsequently got onto several of his teammates. A troop of players duly



“You need to be doing something good and helping to inspire others to be better people and to do good for their community.”

followed his lead and they took to the streets of Dublin.

Speaking on his own involvement, Timmins explained that as "homeless is such a big topic these days and is compounded by the housing crisis. It's quite a complex issue. I wanted to experience what it's like out there while being able to help at the same time. Many of these people haven't had the same chances I've been given. Like that, when I first mentioned it to the lads they were more than willing to help out. They know that we are in a privileged position and with that comes certain responsibilities."

"I always think that whoever is in a position of influence should do something to make a difference," Natasha insists. "If you're in a position where people listen to you, look up to you, you need to be doing something good and helping to inspire others to be better people and to do good for their community. They are the people who make it 'cool'. Yet most of them don't do enough. But the Leinster lads got straight into it. They were brilliant."

"Our volunteers are our backbone. We rely on them. Many of them come to us through word of mouth so it's great to have the Leinster team out with us. A few weeks ago, we also had the Dublin team. All of it helps to raise awareness of what we do and of the problem that exists. We have a lot of young people who come to us and that is inspiring for me. While their mates are going out partying or heading for drinks, they're here with us cooking and preparing. These people will be the next doctors, nurses and businessmen and it's great that have them on board and have them see the other side. It's very important that they develop a humanitarian awareness."

As Timmins, Josh van der Flier and Garry Ringrose accompanied Natasha on her nightly expedition, they too met with the human element that so many choose to ignore. From meeting a grandfather in a doorway on Grafton Street to another individual who was only given a bed for a night by his probation officer, the Leinster players met all walks of life as they try to get by.

"These people don't really care for rugby. They care for what will get them through the night. Josh had a black eye and that became the joke of the evening. Every homeless person asked him what had happened to him. He was looking after making the tea so they all just assumed that he hadn't made a cup right and got a box off someone on his travels! It was good for the lads to see that side. Many think these people choose to be homeless. They don't. They're just regular joe-soaps who are glad of a chat."



IRPA NEWS

IRPA Is The World Representative Body Of Professional Rugby Players On International Issues Of Importance To Players And The Game Of Rugby

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE AGREEMENT INCLUDE:

- A co-operative approach to resolving key international issues.
- The joint management of the ongoing Rugby Athletes' Commission and player consultation and input into the annual World Rugby Medical Commission Conference.
- A focus on all aspects on player welfare, including concussion, mental health; and player load.
- An agreement to work together on various collaborative projects such as agent registration and personal development programmes.
- A continued commitment to engage on research projects together, such as post tournament player surveys and reports.
- The proactive involvement of Players in game related issues such as international player release, eligibility and availability, law reviews; and competition, tournament and season structure matters as they arise.

Co-presidents of the International Rugby Players Association (IRPA), Richie McCaw and Jonathan Sexton have helped drive an historic deal with World Rugby that gives professional players an even stronger voice in the game and sees the organisation relocate to Dublin to work closely with rugby's governing body.

The new deal which is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is a four-year agreement running from 2017 – 2020 and ensures players will be represented and consulted on key issues and decisions affecting the professional players and the future of the game. The Rugby Athletes' Commission, which was established in 2014, is a key forum for players to voice their opinions and work with World Rugby to help with the provision of development and support programmes in the key areas of career, education and work experience, financial management, professional rugby obligations and mental health and wellness.

Areas relating to concussion, game training and playing load, injury prevention and rehabilitation and player health and safety will be discussed on an ongoing basis and, in particular, at the annual World Rugby Medical Commission conference. Double Rugby World Cup winning captain and IRPA Southern Hemisphere President Richie McCaw, who also played a key role in the negotiations, says: "This historic agreement between IRPA and World Rugby is ground-breaking in its nature, setting the tone for future interactions between professional players and administrators at a global level. I have no doubt that the organisation will go from strength to strength given the opportunities that this agreement presents and the strong relationship that exists with World Rugby"

IRPA Northern Hemisphere president, Jonathan Sexton, says: "It's important that players are united and have a strong voice in the game. This deal with World Rugby is a good step forward to addressing many of issues facing Rugby players across the world.

"There are obviously still areas, especially around player welfare, that we have to improve and I'm confident that IRPA can work positively with World Rugby and the domestic Player Associations and National Unions to make the sport better for all involved, both on and off the field."

The platform created by the new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has also allowed IRPA to relocate their head office from Auckland to Dublin to be in closer proximity to World Rugby's headquarters in the Irish Capital, and recruit a

dedicated CEO in former Rugby Players Ireland head Omar Hassanein.

Founding IRPA Executive Director Rob Nichol, said "With the united support and input of all our member Player Associations, professional players across the world, Richie and Johnny and a management team of Simon Keogh and Josh Blackie, and under the Chairmanship of the RPA CEO Damian Hopley, we have managed to forge a very positive and constructive working relationship with World Rugby.

"This has cumulating in an agreement that is truly world class and we are absolutely thrilled with the platform that has been created for the players and the game.

"We want to thank and acknowledge World Rugby Chairman Bill Beaumont, CEO Brett Gosper and his management team for the work they have out into this MOU, and look forward to seeing IRPA under Omar's leadership continue to thrive."

New IRPA CEO Omar Hassanein, said "This MOU greatly enhances our relationship with World Rugby and is fantastic news, for not only all professional players at the elite level but also for the game itself. It is a huge positive to have players better represented at boardroom level when key decisions are being made that affect the game of Rugby,"

says Hassanein.

"With IRPA acting as guardian to the entire professional player group globally, both parties are conscious that whilst interest and opinions may not always align, the strength of the relationship is in respecting the views of all stakeholders – not least the players themselves who are integral to the success of the game."

World Rugby Chairman Bill Beaumont, says: "World Rugby and IRPA share a common vision and mission to ensure that players at all levels are at the heart of the game, and that includes in the boardroom.

"The signing of the historic first memorandum of understanding in 2007 has achieved just that through representation on key committees and working groups and via the Rugby Athletes.

'Commission over recent years, ensuring playing viewpoints are included in player welfare, laws and regulatory matters. Under this new MOU as a sport, we can look to an exciting future of growth and prosperity with players central to that ongoing success."

The MoU also sees an agreement for the Player's Association to share in an increased portion of the game's proceeds to enable further development of key development and support programmes.



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JONNY STEWART



Jonny, you made your senior Ulster debut in October. Can you describe the experience?

It was a really enjoyable and exciting experience for me. My nerves were wrecked leading up to the game but I think that was more excitement than anything. I didn't know what to expect so I just tried to focus on what I do every time I take the field for any team and treat it like just another match – but deep down I knew it was far from that.

You were just five years of age when Tommy Bowe made his Ulster debut, was taking the field with the 2009 Grand Slam winner a daunting prospect?

Not at all! All of the guys including Tommy have been unreal in welcoming me into the squad and made me feel as comfortable as I think I could have been. The whole squad was so driven in the week leading up to the game. The only thing that mattered was performing in training and on the day. It didn't matter who was involved.

What have you learned from the likes of Bowe, Andrew Trimble and captain Rory Best?

I think if you were to name three guys who encapsulate what it means to be an Ulster Rugby Player it would be them. They bring an intensity to training but in an enjoyable way – that's rugby should be all about. They don't lose focus despite the massive number of achievements between them and to listen to each of them on and off the field had been an invaluable experience.

You followed your bow by making the trip to Port Elizabeth to face the Southern Kings, how have you integrated into the squad?

It was a little bit strange at first but once you get chatting to everyone it's just like being with any other team. Being exposed to the guys for a straight week out there was really valuable in terms of building a bit of a bond off the pitch which I think will be important going forward.

What was your toughest lesson?

I think having to start to put a lot of weight on. The S&C schedule can be brutal at times and the amounts of food that you have to take in can be obscene, but its part and parcel of the game and once I got to grips with it all it just becomes a daily habit.

You earned great praise for your performances during the Ulster Schools Cup in 2015/2016 winning the Player of the Year award that season for your efforts with Wallace High School, but

did you think that your future lay in the sport? If not, what did you hope to do?

I was always aware of the opportunity to be part of the Ulster Academy. I was hopeful throughout my last year of school in that if things went well and I kept increasing the level of rugby I might have a chance. But I also knew that no matter what happened from a rugby point-of-view, I would still be looking to higher education. I applied to Queens University in the hope that I could stay at home and continue in my efforts to get into the Academy.

What (and where) are you studying?

Luckily both paid off! I'm currently in my 2nd year (of 3) of my law degree at Queens. It's tough work a lot of the time but I know the importance of having something to fall back on at some point as sport can be unpredictable at times, so I try to get through it as best as I can.

Do you have any other hobbies or interests?

I love a good game of table tennis as well as a decent Coffee. My down time would usually be filled with a couple of games to pass the time and clear the head.

Do you find that having a focus outside of rugby helps with your game?

Yes, it really does. There are times when the game can really get on top of you especially if things aren't going too well. It's nice to be able to prioritise something else for a few hours which also makes you a little bit more excited to go back to rugby again.

Jacob Stockdale recently lit up the international stage, while Andrew Porter and James Ryan also featured during the November series. All featured as Ireland progressed to the U20 Rugby World Cup Final in 2016. Despite a disappointing tournament in 2017, do you see many of your teammates making a similar impact?

There was a huge amount of quality in last year's squad. Unfortunately, we picked up a few injuries ahead of the World Cup, but those lads have since returned and now we see the likes of Jordan Larmour and Fineen Wycherly getting a number of senior caps for their provinces. Thankfully, we have a number of lads returning this year to the 20's squad so we should have a few cool heads on experienced shoulders going into this year's 6 Nations and JWC campaign.

Finally, in 2018 Jonny Stewart will...

Be part of a successful Ireland U20 6 Nations and JWC campaign and hopefully get a few more senior caps under my belt!



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